

US: Millions still without power a week after Hurricane Isabel

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The devastation left behind by Hurricane Isabel, which struck the mid-Atlantic United States on September 18-19, raises new questions about the decay of the US infrastructure, particularly the electrical power system whose critical weaknesses were already exposed in the blackout that hit eight states in the Northeast and Midwest a month ago.

The hurricane came ashore in North Carolina on the afternoon of Thursday, September 18, moving on a northwesterly track which brought the eye of the storm over central Virginia and then about 60 miles west of the Washington DC metropolitan area. By Friday, seven state governments had declared states of emergency: North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey, as well as the District of Columbia.

As many as 40 people died in storm-related incidents, some drowned by rising flood waters, others hit by flying objects propelled by winds of up to 100 miles per hour, others falling victim to carbon monoxide poisoning from unventilated emergency generators or electrocuted by downed power lines. Three power company linemen were killed working to restore electricity, two in Maryland and one in North Carolina.

More than 15 million people lost electricity services in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia, the area hardest hit, and 3 million were still without power Wednesday, September 24, a full week after the storm. The two biggest utilities, Dominion Electric in Virginia and Potomac Electric Power (Pepco) in the Washington DC area, said that some customers would not have their power restored until two weeks after the storm.

Dominion Electric had nearly half a million customers—close to 2 million people—without power, mainly in the Norfolk and Richmond metropolitan areas. Another 250,000 customers of Pepco and Baltimore Gas & Electric, nearly 1 million people, were without power in Maryland and Washington DC.

Several hundred school buildings were without power in

Washington and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs, about one-sixth of the total, forcing class cancellations for tens of thousands of school children. A second rainstorm on Tuesday, September 22 forced many schools that had reopened to shut down because of renewed outages and flooding.

The storm had a dramatic impact on many regional landmarks: it shut down the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, the first time the bridge was closed by weather in its 51-year-history; the Midtown Tunnel between Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia was closed by flooding; a storm-weakened overhead road sign began to give way and forced a four-hour closing of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, on the Washington Beltway; a huge sinkhole, four stories deep and 110 feet long, forced the closing of Interstate 70 near Frederick, Maryland, as well as an adjacent commuter rail line; Alexandria, Virginia's historic Old Town area was under 10 feet of water; flooding at the Tidal Basin, near the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials, brought traffic on Interstate 95 to a halt.

High winds did the most damage to the electrical system, toppling thousands of trees, cutting thousands of power lines and shutting down 1,150 out of 1,600 primary distribution circuits in Virginia. Rain water did nearly as much damage. Thousands of homes were inundated by the storm surge along the coastline and many more were flooded in low-lying areas inland.

A representative of the Insurance Information Institute estimated the total cost of Hurricane Isabel as \$5 billion, half of it damage to businesses and public infrastructure, half of it damage to homes. Because of changes in insurance coverage in the aftermath of the devastating financial losses caused by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, as well as smaller storms over the past decade, only 20 percent of damage will be covered. The bulk of the repair cost will come out of the pockets of homeowners and small businessmen, driving many weaker companies into bankruptcy.

The impact of the storm on the electrical system was far more severe than expected in the hours before Isabel arrived.

The power distribution lines, in particular, proved to be extremely vulnerable to what was, in the final analysis, a comparatively modest weather event. Isabel's force diminished considerably before it made landfall. It dropped from a category 5 storm, the most powerful, to category 2 as it traveled through the Atlantic Ocean towards the continental US.

A major factor appears to be the reduction in maintenance spending by the electric utilities, particularly on the distribution system—the same problem highlighted by the August 14-15 blackout, which began in Ohio and Michigan and spread through Ontario and into New York state. In the case of Dominion Power, the company's maintenance spending on overhead distribution lines fell sharply last year, from \$49 million in 2001 to only \$27 million.

More fundamentally, the protracted power outage demonstrated the anarchic state of the electrical power system as a whole. Pepco issued an emergency appeal for additional linemen to help it restore power, but was only able to recruit a few hundred from other companies to the north, far fewer than were needed. No central authority exists to coordinate either the everyday workings of the power grid—which currently has 142 separate control centers, each independent of the others—or the response to an emergency like Isabel.

In the wake of the storm, there were widespread press reports of poor performance by emergency preparedness agencies, at both the state and federal level. County officials in both the Richmond and Norfolk areas complained that the state of Virginia failed to respond promptly to requests for water, ice, generators and other emergency supplies, as well as for emergency personnel.

The mayor of Newport News, Virginia, a city of more than 100,000, said he had requested water deliveries from the state on Thursday, but did not receive any supplies until Monday, after the city had succeeded in restoring its own water system.

Lynda Price, the emergency management coordinator for Chesterfield County, in the Richmond suburbs, told the *New York Times*, "I believe that a good part of our problem is with the state department of emergency management, who continually says, 'We'll get back to you.' They are overwhelmed, undertrained."

There was also criticism of the emergency response by the utilities themselves. Dominion Power did not even send a representative to the emergency operations center in Fairfax County, the state's most populous, in the Washington suburbs, and did not return phone calls from Fairfax, County Executive Anthony H. Griffin.

Jack B. Johnson, county executive of Prince George's County, in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, said of

both Pepco and Baltimore Gas & Electric, "I want them to know that they are moving too slowly, and people are running out of patience."

These problems take on added significance, given that the Washington DC metropolitan area has been the subject of the most intensive emergency preparedness planning by the Bush administration and its new Department of Homeland Security, the new super-agency set up after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

While the Department of Homeland Security controls vast resources and immense manpower, it is clear that these are not being used to protect the lives and livelihoods of the millions of working people who live in the US capital and its surrounding suburbs—or in Norfolk, headquarters of the Atlantic Fleet. Far from being ready to deal with the consequences of an unpredictable terrorist attack on Washington, federal and state authorities were unable even to manage the response to a hurricane whose path towards the region was being tracked minute-by-minute for a week before it hit the mid-Atlantic states.

This experience confirms once again that the Bush administration does not take seriously its own rhetoric about the imminence of new and even more devastating terrorist attacks on the US mainland, which it has used to keep the American people politically off balance and to win support for its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since September 11, 2001 the Bush administration, with the full backing of Democrats and Republicans in Congress, has adopted a series of the antidemocratic measures, including both the USA Patriot Act and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. These are aimed, not at protecting the American people, but at building up the repressive forces of the state for use against future eruptions of popular unrest, brought on by the intensifying social crisis in the United States.



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